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The failures of success – NGOs and the decreasing support for civil society in Namibia

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The article focuses on the narratives and practices of a shrinking NGO sector in Namibia. It argues that looking at NGOs decline instead of their rise can yield valuable new insights for the study of non-governmental organizations. It shows the ways in which decline in funding had an impact on the NGOs' relations with the state and international donors and how such decline affected the organisations' internal practices. The main aim of the paper is to contribute to the growing ethnographic literature on NGOs in Africa by highlighting the role of outside factors, above all a changing perception of the Namibian state as democratically consolidated, in determining the relations between NGOs, the state and donors and re-shaping NGOs' everyday practices.

Introduction*

Scholars and international development practitioners have frequently presented NGOs in Africa as the voice of the people (Clarke 1998; Jordan and van Tuijl 2000). Practitioners and theorists thought they had found not only a new way to deliver development but also an alternative means to administer democratic consolidation as NGOs have often been equated with the presence of civil society and continuing processes of democratisation (Rich Dorman 2005).

This has also been the case in Namibia where NGOs were seen as crucial players in the transition from apartheid to majority rule after independence in 1990 and as essential in providing checks on the guerrilla movement turned government. High levels of civil society funding from international aid agencies contributed to the creation of a vibrant and diverse NGO sector and the Namibian constitution of 1990 appeared to guarantee them a relatively strong position vis-à-vis the central government.

However, over the recent years, the Namibian NGO sector has experienced a marked decline in funding and thus in size. It has also been subjected to more stringent conditions of reporting and evaluation. Organisations previously seen as 'watchdogs' like human rights advocacy and democracy-training organisations suffered from a drastic erosion of funds and, in recent years, have shrunk considerably in size. Many NGO employees fear that the heyday of NGO funding in Namibia is over and that their organisations will have to make considerable changes if they want to survive the current onslaught on their budgets. In Namibia there has thus been a widespread perception of decline amongst NGO activists for some time now.

Looking at the reasons for and the timing of the funding decline will shed new perspectives on the tripartite relation between the state, NGOs and donors. The article will highlight the crucial importance of the international perception

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of the Namibian state as having managed the transition to multiparty democracy rather successfully. The state has become a legitimate recipient of international funding and therefore a direct competitor with civil society organisations for funding. The first section of the article shows how the new legitimacy of the Namibian state led to a redirection of funding from NGOs towards the central government and ultimately altered the relationship between the state and NGOs as well as the relationship between NGOs and their donors.

The second section of the article looks at the changing practices and self-representations of NGOs in times of great distress. It shows how NGOs struggled to reconcile funding imperatives and their own project priorities in their proposal writing, how they tried to juggle commissioned and “good” work, and finally how they justified difficult decisions about which projects to abandon. Having to access different kinds of funds sometimes meant walking a fine line between opposing and assisting government. They presented themselves at times as essential ‘watchdogs’, and, at others, as indispensable aides to government. The focus on everyday practices and coping strategies of NGOs illustrates the general argument of Tim Kelsall and Jim Igoe (Kelsall and Igoe 2005) that NGO development, including NGO decline, is not an ordered linear processes, but happens due to unforeseen and ad hoc processes and decisions arising out of newly arising and newly closed opportunities.

For a long time the literature on southern civil society organisations has tried to establish how “good” they really were (Ndegwa 1996; Oloka – Onyanga 2002; Shepherd, 1996) and whether notions like democracy or human rights were indigenous or imposed from outside (An-Na'im 2002; An-Na'im and Deng 1990; Ojo 2006; Wiredu 1996). Recent accounts of southern NGOs, however, have started to focus on what these organisations do rather than trying to find out what they “really” are. They have looked at the changing positioning of NGOs in domestic and international politics over time (Pommerolle 2005; Rich Dorman 2005) or in different forums (Nauta 2004; Temudo 2005). Looking at what NGOs do in the face of decline and how this

compares to what they say they do adds another dimension to the study of NGO practices.

Finally, the article shows how the narratives and practices of decline also brought out sharply the role NGOs or “civil society” played in the lives of the people working for the organisations. It demonstrates that once the central state provides more security and better paid jobs, employment in NGOs becomes a conscious decision from which people draw considerable pride and clearly mark the boundary between themselves and those employed in other sectors.

The article will focus on the narratives and practices of NGO decline in Namibia. It argues that looking at NGO decline instead of their rise can yield valuable new insights for the study of non-governmental organisations. Drawing on interviews with NGO staff and donor representatives in Namibia it shows the various ways in which the decline had an impact on NGOs’ relations with the state and international donors and how it affected the organisations’ internal practices. It thus adds to the growing ethnographic literature on NGOs in Africa by highlighting the role of outside factors, above all a changing perception of the Namibian state as democratically consolidated, in changing the NGOs’ relations with the state and the donors and NGOs everyday practices.

NGOs in Namibia

Namibia has a vibrant civil society, the national umbrella body NANGOF (the Namibian NGO Forum) estimates the number of NGOs at about 150 with equally as many community-based organisations.¹ This is a very impressive number given that Namibia has only 2 million inhabitants. Non-governmental

¹See: <http://www.nangof.iway.na/index.htm>. NANGOF labels particular organisations as “NGOs” and sets them apart from community-based organisations (CBOs) or faith-based organisations (FBOs). For the purpose of this article I adopt NANGOF’s arguably very narrow definition of an NGO as a civil society organisation that is organised for a public purpose; has a written constitution; has a governance structure which distinguishes between the Board and its secretariat; prepares and publishes audited annual accounts; and has a bank account. However, the NGO label has been repeatedly called into question during the interviews as being too vague and being applied to very different organisations, a point Mercer (2002) also makes for its use in the academic literature.

organisations work in diverse sectors, from traditional advocacy oriented organisations taking on human rights and democracy issues to health promotion mostly focusing on HIV/AIDS counselling and environmental concerns. Most of these organisations were set up immediately after independence, although some advocacy organisations previously played a vital role in oppositional politics under apartheid. As Bauer noted, a significant feature of the post independence period in Namibia has been the growing visibility and apparent influence of civil society organisations in the country (Bauer 2001: 49).

Despite its past influence and achievements, civil society in Namibia has also experienced serious difficulties from time to time, especially in its tense relations with the government and the lack of overall coordination due to an often-paralysed umbrella organisation (NANGOF). NANGOF was constituted shortly after independence in 1991, and has experienced problems of funding and credibility since its inception. Many organisations complained that for a long time NANGOF was not carrying out its principal task of coordinating activities between its members, instead, it had started to set up its own projects and was competing with NGOs for funds. NANGOF also lost its position as NGO representative vis-à-vis the government when its relations with the National Planning Commission, the government's central coordinating committee for development projects in Namibia, broke down at the end of the 1990s.² Years of crisis followed until NANGOF underwent a fundamental restructuring which included a considerable downsizing of staff to one national coordinator in 2002 to ensure that the umbrella organisation did not take on projects. However, a significantly smaller secretariat has in fact meant that NANGOF has not successfully managed to fulfil its coordinating role and many organisations remain sceptical that it will ever become the strong administrative body they wished for.

² Attempts to formalise relations between the government and the NGO sector through a policy paper in 1999 were marred by accusations from NGOs that the government attempted to co-opt the independent organisations and links with the government were cut for a long time. Recently, the government has initiated a new policy process for coordinating and re-establishing the relations to civil society known as the 'New Civic Organisations Partnership Policy'. However, it remains to be seen how the relations develop (GRN 2005).

The lack of a strong coordinating umbrella became even more problematic when numerous NGOs experienced serious cutbacks in funding over the last years. Many organisations were in grave financial difficulties, some had to close down completely and many shrank considerably in size.

This article is based on interviews³ with donor agencies and staff at research and advocacy NGOs – the organisations that were hit hardest by the recent withdrawal of funds.⁴ When asked about the reasons for the decline in financial support many NGO employees pointed to the recent trends in international aid that seem to have favoured HIV/AIDS organisations and neglected “traditional” NGOs working in the fields of democracy promotion and human rights. However, lack of capacity, especially in management and proposal writing skills, were also seen as major factors accounting for the constant decrease in funding. These problems were not new to the Namibian NGOs nor were they particularly country specific.⁵ Arguably, international aid has always followed certain trends, prioritising particular topics over others (Crush 1995; Sachs 1992). Additionally donors have employed formal requirements for a long time to evaluate NGOs’ performance. The question that troubled many NGO activists was why now these factors had become so decisive for donors.

³ A round of twelve semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion were carried out at Namibian NGOs and several donor agencies between October and December 2006. The themes of the interviews, current NGOs’ funding in Namibia, was agreed on beforehand but the interviews’ questions were designed to leave enough room for the respondents’ own views. In this way the research attempted to get a better picture of what were the most pressing issues.

⁴ The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) shrank from 7 to 2 employees, the Legal Assistance Centre (LAC) had to close down 2 of its former 5 project units with one of remaining unit only staffed with one person, and the National Economic Policy Research Unit (NEPRU) listed 19 researchers in its annual report for 2002/2003 whereas currently it only employs 9 fulltime researchers (NEPRU 2003).

⁵ The annual report of NEPRU in 1997 already mentioned problems of recruiting and holding qualified staff. Similar problems have been incurred by South African NGOs, for example, see: Habib, A & Taylor, R (1999) ‘South Africa: Anti-Apartheid NGOs in Transition,’ *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 10, 73-82; Pieterse, E. (1997) ‘South African NGOs and the trials of transition,’ *Development in Practice*, 7, 157-166; and Tjonneland, E. (2004) ‘Norway and the NGO channel: the case of South Africa - The Role of Norwegian NGOs in relation to South Africa,’ Chr. Michelsen Institute, Norway.

NGOs - State Relations

Accounts of NGOs in Africa are often enmeshed within wider debates about the position and the purpose of “civil society” in Africa and its relationship to the state (Mercer 2002). Recent ethnographic data on transnational NGOs has shown that individuals frequently move between governmental institutions and the NGO sector, blurring the neatly constructed boundaries of the literature (Dezalay and Garth 2002; Guilhot 2005). Other accounts have shown how local African civil society actors forge links with international movements to better position themselves in their domestic advocacy scene and vis-à-vis the state (Cameron 2001; Igoe 2006). Scholarly analyses have thus focused on the rise of NGOs, their relations to state agencies and their donors and how civil society actors capitalised on emerging international opportunities (Igoe 2003; Clarke 1998; Keck and Sikkink 1998).

Namibian NGOs by contrast have been confronted with the waning support for civil society organisations. In their eyes, donors no longer see NGOs as the embodiment of democratic transition, nor do they any longer believe that supporting NGOs is necessarily better than funding states (Naidoo 2003; Akbar Zaid 1999). NGOs could no longer capitalise on principled support for the non-governmental sector, nor could they call upon to a strong pro-NGO discourse at the international level to support their position.⁶ The decreasing support for NGOs in Namibia reveals a deep gap between international aid practices of scaling down civil society in arguably stable democracies and current models of democratic consolidation (Diamond 1999; Bratton 1994) which postulate that the support for a strong civil society is indispensable during and after a country's transition to democracy.

Namibian NGOs were founded at the beginning of the 1990s and thus at a highpoint of international aid for the non governmental sector (Agg 2006). Most of the newly set up organisations had a considerable amount of staff and several international donors agreed to fund entire NGOs over a certain period

⁶ San organisations have tried to make use of the international movement of indigenous people, but have a difficult standing in Namibia, because the state does not officially recognise claims to indigenous rights, see: Suzman, J. (2001) *An Assessment of the Status of the San in Namibia*, Windhoek: Legal Assistance Centre.

of time. Civil society was seen to be essential in the Namibian transition towards a stable democracy and as an important check on the government to implement democratic liberal reforms as promised (Melber 2003). Seventeen years after independence Namibia's transition to democracy is generally regarded as successfully completed⁷ although critical voices remain (Bauer 2001; Melber 2002; Melber 2005).

Recent trends in international aid towards Namibia show a clear preference for state agencies, with traditional state supporters like the World Bank or the US government through its Millennium Challenge Account pouring new money in and traditional civil society supporters retrenching their funding. The Swedish development organisation SIDA has recently closed its Namibian country office and HIVOS, a Dutch organisation supporting mainly civil society organisations, now only enters into short-term contracts.⁸ The changed perception of the Namibian state coincided with other factors such as turnovers in donor governments and the decreasing importance of foreign aid in national policy making after a new government had come into power, as it was the case in Norway. Other donor governments like Austria decided to give all their development assistance to a few least developed countries and to support civil societies in only selected countries (ADA 2005). All of these developments contributed to a decrease in civil society funding and a general shift towards state funding in Namibia.

This trend has left many traditional civil society organisations in Namibia with a significant erosion of their financial supports. These organisations feel they have lost touch with their long-term supporters and see themselves confronted with the difficult task of looking for new sources of funds while

⁷ The Bertelsman Transformation Index (2006) ranked Namibia 26 out of 119 with good chances for the development of neoliberal democracy (Bertelsmann Foundation 2006); see also: EU (2001) 'EU-Namibia Country Support Strategy 2001-2006,' available at: http://ec.europa.eu/development/how/iqsg/docs/print/na_csp_en.pdf.; USAID (2001) 'Launch of Parliament Online,' available at: <http://www.usaid.gov/na/news3.htm> and Chege, M. (1995) 'Between Africa's Extremes,' *Journal of Democracy*, 6.

⁸ On the recent trend in international aid to allocate increased funds again to states see also the debate after the influential article by Burnside, C. & Dollar, D. (2000) 'Aid, Policies, and Growth,' *The American Economic Review*, 90. And the subsequent discussion by Easterly, W., Levine, R. & Roodman, D. (2003) 'New Data, New doubts: A Comment on Burnside and Dollar's Aid, Policies, and Growth,' *NBER Working Paper No. 9846*.

coping with their daily workload. The Namibian state has become a powerful competitor for increasingly scarce funding and NGOs had to find out that being independent of the state does not necessarily constitute an advantage anymore. Moreover, governmental representatives occasionally accuse civil society organisations as being not elected and thus not accountable to the general public (Maletsky 1999).

NGOs and Donor Relations

The changed perception of the Namibian state in international politics and the accompanying shift of funding away from civil society organisations deeply affected the relations between NGOs and their donors. With decreasing funds for Namibian civil society, NGOs and donors differed more openly about aid priorities in Namibia. Remarkably, neither side used particularly new arguments to assert their position. Instead, already existing divisions and prejudices came to the fore more forcefully and manifested themselves occasionally as serious accusations.

Donors started to use formal criteria like the lack of formal feedback and skills in sound proposal writing and budget drafting to justify their withdrawal of funding from NGOs while re-allocating it, in part, to line ministries. Formal criteria have for a long time been an integral part of donor requirements from their partners and complaints about the low level of skills in civil society organisations have been as old as these demands. Donors in fact held many workshops for NGO staff to improve their skills. However, such requirements had hardly ever been enforced before, let alone been considered as decisive justifications for terminating support. By insisting on proper feedback and pointing to their own constraints donors stressed the importance of being accountable to an increasingly critical public in their home countries. Donors seem to suggest that NGOs showed insufficient understanding of the dilemmas that come with being answerable to an electorate. They therefore drew on older charges against NGOs as not being elected and thus not

accountable to a general public.⁹ Furthermore, donors encouraged NGOs to repeat the processes that had been criticised in international development for long, namely to produce glossy reports instead of concentrating on their “proper” work.¹⁰

NGOs complained that they felt disempowered and had no real influence on what was funded, pointing to recent fashions in international aid as determining funding priorities in Namibia more than real needs in the country. They repeated old complaints – that donors single-handedly dictated the agenda without paying attention to local needs, which NGOs claimed to best understand. NGOs thus re-iterated the widespread criticism of international donors as blind to local particularities (Hobart 1993; Neumann 1997). They ignored, however, that donors in Namibia have often been bound by the decisions of the National Planning Commission, a governmental agency set up to negotiate aid priorities and to streamline developmental efforts in the country. In accusing donors of dictating the agenda NGOs ignored the government’s crucial role in establishing overall development priorities since independence. Moreover, they seemed to have forgotten that civil society associations had taken part in establishing aid priorities through NANGOF until the breakdown of relations between the government and civil society. Donors and NGOs used thus different levers, accountability versus authenticity, to advance their position in a contested conversation about the real needs and constraints of aid in Namibia.

Actual relations between NGOs and their donors differed considerably from the common arguments in the literature. NGOs were not only answerable to

⁹ The topic of a lack of NGO accountability has long been debated by scholars and political practitioners. The UN-NGO liaison service even published a special dossier on NGO accountability, available at: http://www.un-ngls.org/pdf/NGO_Accountability.pdf ; see also: Edwards, M. & Hulme, D. (Eds.) (1996) *Beyond the Magic Bullet: NGO Performance and Accountability in the Post - Cold War World*, West Hartford: Kumarian Press; and SLIM, H. (2002) 'By What Authority? The Legitimacy and Accountability of Non-governmental Organisations.' The International Council on Human Rights Policy International Meeting on Global Trends and Human Rights - Before and after September 11.

¹⁰ Easterly, W. (2002) 'The cartel of good intentions: the problem of bureaucracy in foreign aid,' *Journal of Economic Policy Reform*, 5, 223-250. On the adverse effects of this donor policy on NGOs in South Africa see: Bornstein, L. (2006) 'Systems of Accountability, Webs of Deceit? Monitoring and Evaluation in South African NGOs,' *Development*, 49.

their donors (Okafor 2006), nor did donors completely disempower NGOs by pursuing a neoliberal agenda (Dicklitch 2003; Michael 2006; Schuller 2007). It was certainly easier for donors to justify the withdrawal of funding than for NGOs to close the resulting gaps in their budgets and both sides occupied very different positions in the overall power relations in international aid. However, NGOs had their own resources in negotiating the agenda, including the general acknowledgement that a civil society was necessary in a stable democracy which meant that NGOs could use the threat to close down completely and thus weakening civil society in Namibia, if their projects were not approved. With this argument NGOs hoped they could count on the donors' keen interest in keeping at least a certain number of NGOs alive.¹¹

NGO-donor relations were not entirely dictated by one side, but were the result of ongoing negotiations in which each side tried to capitalise on its perceived resources in the overall struggle for credibility. This contestation was surely not new to donor-NGO relations nor was it particular to a situation of decreasing funds, but the gulfs between the two sides came out much more clearly in times of high contestations over funding.

NGOs from the inside: rhetoric, practices and difficult decisions

The NGOs' declining funds not only altered their relations with the state and donors, the rapidly shrinking budgets also brought out sharp discontinuities between official rhetoric and actual campaigning practices within the organisations. Competition between different sub units within NGOs increased alongside this shift to project based funding. The need for a clear and unified mission statement and a corporate identity brought out considerable disagreements about the organisations' core work. Comparing what NGO staff said they did with actual everyday practices also illustrates the point that in the everyday NGO work the distinction between "committed" work and fundraising imperatives could not be maintained, especially when a shift away

¹¹ One donor representative reported that his organisation provided emerging assistance to one Namibian NGO whenever this organisation was short of money just to keep it open (Interview with donor agency November 2006).

from stable and long term NGO funding required the organisations to spend ever more time on fundraising.

1. International funding trends and local needs

Confronted with decreasing funds many NGO staff stated that they would abandon their NGO work altogether if their projects were no longer funded. In fact, however, NGOs invested long hours and energy in finding out what could appeal to the international aid community before conceptualising new projects. Most NGOs toyed with the idea of having a professional fundraiser or in fact had one member of staff who did mainly this despite claims to set up projects irrespective of recent “fashions” in international aid. This is not to say that their final project proposals were not tailored in accordance with Namibian needs, but the process of project generating was more complex than often portrayed by NGOs. The gender advocacy unit at the Legal Assistance Centre, for instance, set up a domestic violence project at a time when a domestic rape bill was proposed in parliament. However, the new focus on violence also coincided with recent developments in international aid. Many international donors had stopped funding projects on the structural positioning of women after gender mainstreaming had been introduced. Additionally, the focus on rape could be connected to HIV/AIDS and thus to a topic that has received high levels of external assistance recently. Other NGOs tried to connect some of their projects to the topic of HIV/AIDS, for example, the IPPR has commissioned research work on the impact of HIV/AIDS (van Zyl 2003) and publishes a regular HIV/AIDS bulletin; and NEPRU has established an entire research area on HIV/AIDS and development in Namibia and Southern Africa. The HIV/AIDS prevalence in Namibia is one of the highest in the world¹² and research on the pandemic is thus clearly a local need. On the other hand, the topic receives extraordinarily high amounts of funding internationally and the NGOs are painfully aware that some of their projects need to be connected to the topic in order to get funding.

¹² Family Health International (2007) 'Country profiles - Namibia,' available at: <http://www.fhi.org/eng/countryprofiles/namibia+main+page.htm>.

II. Consultancies and campaigning

NGO staff spent long hours doing commercial consultancies despite their outspoken commitment to not-for-profit work. Most of these consultancies were portrayed as necessary “sacrifices” to fund their “proper” work. It shows that in the muddle of everyday work neat distinctions between “committed” activism and profitable work could not be maintained. This becomes especially visible when funds were so scarce that the NGO was no longer in a position to decide freely where to spend resources at and had to make painful decisions about how to divide human resources and time.

The heightened pressure from donors to scale up the management aspects of the NGO work and improve on project proposals and feedback increased the load of duties, and many NGO staff did not regard these as “proper” work. NGO staff often spend long days in donor organised workshops on how to improve on their management and reporting skills, but many donor agencies complained that the level of feedback reports had not substantially improved.¹³

III. NGOs as government's watchdogs and aides

Tensions arose also between the NGO self-image and everyday campaigning practices in connection with the organisations' relations to government agencies. Most of the NGOs would portray themselves as completely independent from the state and as critical watchdogs for state policies. However, they started to undertake quasi-governmental duties like legal drafting¹⁴ or training of implementation agencies. In times of crisis there was arguably a heightened need to portray oneself as a watchdog in order to receive civil society funding. However, NGOs also had to point to their role in supporting government and highlight the importance of the training they

¹³ The tension here refers to the NGOs' official commitment to improve on the quality of their reports and the actual practice of many employees to keep the usual reporting style. It could be argued that this practice might constitute a form of “resistance” whereby donor demands were formally met by attending the workshop but they were not put into practice as these workshops hardly had any consequences for the reporting habits. Many donor agencies were aware of this contradiction and therefore doubted that increasing the level of training to NGO staff would really address the problem of poor feedback.

¹⁴ I thank Gregor Dobler for pointing this out to me.

provided for ministries. Making the organisation indispensable often meant walking a thin line between state support and state control for NGOs.

IV. Making difficult choices

Finally many NGO had to face difficult choices and close down some of their sub-units as donors no longer provided funding to an entire NGO for a fixed period of time irrespective of its projects. This meant that each sub-unit within an NGO had its own budget and could secure its own survival as long as distinct projects were running. This often led to the de facto split of NGOs into several smaller autonomous units which competed with each other for decreasing funds. It is striking that units with a strong research component survived while the service delivery units were closed down. The Legal Assistance Centre for example, cut down on legal advice to the public at headquarters level, closed down advisory offices outside of the capital and closed its legal education project; the Institute for Public Policy Research which has asserted its position as linchpin of national knowledge production by commissioning research work abandoned making research papers available to schools as too costly; NEPRU, the organisation specialising in economic policy analysis, gave up providing economics training to learners at senior secondary schools. They therefore all concentrated on research – asserting their positions as experts in their respective fields of knowledge at the expense of providing training or advice to the Namibian public.

Both NGOs and donors acknowledged that cutting down on service provision was a hard choice but argued that it had become unavoidable with increasing difficulties in justifying funding for “intangible” goals like “awareness rising”. It is by far easier to find funding for projects with a clear output like research reports. However, most NGO staff I interviewed saw themselves as experts in their own field of research rather than as service deliverers and would make a clear distinction between their advocacy NGOs and those working “with communities” like HIV/AIDS counselling organisations or NGOs working on community wildlife conservation.

The meaning of NGO work for staff

The decline in funding meant that difficult choices had to be made for the future of the organisation. It also often implied critical decisions in the individual activists' life about whether to stay at a shrinking organisation or to go and find better paid employment elsewhere.

NGOs have been often portrayed as career steps for individual actors (Rich Dorman 2004; De Waal 2003), making them one amongst many options to advance personal careers or broaden neo-patrimonial networks (James et al. 2005). It is often said that actors do not necessarily draw a sharp distinction between governmental work and non-governmental activism. Sometimes people moved to governmental employment in order to work more effectively on their projects (Choup 2006; Guilhot, 2005). They thus blurred the distinction between governmental and non-governmental in their everyday lives.

1. NGO work as committed activism

In contrast to these accounts people expressed a deep commitment to their NGO work as such which often showed very clearly in an insecure job situation. The end of core funding meant that many NGO jobs in Namibia have become highly volatile. People are only employed on annual contracts and normally do not enjoy the same benefits that come with governmental or private sector jobs. NGO work in Namibia is therefore not a good career option or the better-paid alternative to work in line ministries. Most NGO employees were still there despite the very real prospects of finding better-paid jobs in other fields, because they felt that they could cause much deeper changes in society than they could in state employment. This was a source of great pride. It was also compensation for the insecurity and the often considerably lower pay NGO staff received compared to private sector employees or people in governmental positions.

It is certainly hard to rely entirely on continuing employment in a shrinking sector in a country like Namibia where the level of state welfare is low. Most NGO staff therefore had alternatives to fall back on in case the NGO closed

down. They had the option to become a private lawyer or they owned a farm or had ideas of venturing into other businesses. This meant that NGO activism was quite a privilege and something that could only be done by those few who could afford to lose their current jobs. However, it is worth emphasising that most of them saw their non-NGO career option as a last resort and did not want to leave “their” NGO before it was closed down. They felt deeply connected with the cause of the organisation and remained highly sceptical about the possibility of pursuing similar goals in governmental employment. The decline of funding was of course a source of great distress, but it also triggered a remarkable sparkle of pride in people sticking with a the ‘good cause’ in the face of adverse conditions.

Conclusion

This article has argued that looking at NGO decline instead of just concentrating on their rise can yield valuable insights for the study of NGOs. Namibia is arguably an exceptional case in Africa as the state is internationally seen as stable and democratic. Demands of international donors on Namibian non-governmental organisations are therefore much higher than on NGOs in weaker states and NGOs in Namibia have to compete with an internationally legitimate state and a very strong and well-organised private sector.

Nevertheless the study of Namibian NGOs has important implications for the study of NGOs in general. Firstly, it shows that developments within NGOs like the recently much talked about professionalisation are contested projects within the organisations whose meanings and results are far from undisputed. The evolution of NGOs is therefore not an ordered linear process towards a given goal, but a highly debated project with very unforeseeable outcomes. As the article has shown, in times of crisis these struggles came out very clearly in the NGOs’ internal practices and their relations to donors. The need to incorporate a single identity and assert their place vis-à-vis other sectors led NGOs to emphasise certain aspects of their work and neglect others. They started to present themselves as research based organisations and set themselves thus apart from service delivery NGOs. However, the decision to

scale down the outreach part was often highly contested in the NGOs and the ever-closer concentration on a rather narrow field of activism was by far not unanimously accepted by all. External demands of higher levels of management and increased scrutiny of projects were also often questioned and sometimes outright resisted.

Secondly, the focus on NGO decline shows the dynamic links between external relations and internal practices and struggles. The increased competition for NGOs of government ministries and private sector companies for funds forced these organisations to juggle commissioned and not-for-profit work. A changed perception of the Namibian state as stable and democratic had therefore a direct impact on NGOs' internal practices and prioritisation of work. The changed relations with international donors and the end of core funding led to a de facto split of many organisations into smaller sub-units which sometimes directly competed for funds. The heightened controversies within NGOs in times of crisis challenge the usefulness of seeing an NGO as single analytical entity. There is widespread acknowledgement in the literature that there is considerable variation between NGOs in terms of their outlook and the area they work in. However, NGOs are also internally very diversified. Pointing to the internal differences illustrates Donna Murdock's point that NGOs are better seen as contested processes than single entities which allows to acknowledge changing dynamics and internal gaps within the organisations (Murdock 2003).

Looking at the role the NGO work plays in people's lives highlights the importance of individual commitment, but it also shows that commitment can assume very different meanings once the survival of the NGO is at stake. For some employees it meant to fundamentally change the ways in which "their" NGO works in order to secure funding and its survival. For others it meant the exact opposite, i.e. sticking to what was seen as the original idea behind the organisation irrespective of the latest donor demands. This shows that future research on NGOs will need to pay more attention to the meaning of categories like 'commitment', instead of only trying to measure levels of commitment.

In times of crisis the organisations' relations with other actors and their internal practices showed that the NGOs claimed their particular place in the overall conversation about development in Namibia by positioning themselves as experts. They drew a line between themselves and donors, state agencies and communities as the final recipients of development aid rather sharply. They were therefore neither the 'puppets' of their international donors nor were they the sole guarantor of a democratic civil society or the authentic voice of the grassroots. Advocacy NGOs in Namibia presented themselves as a platform for a group of very committed people who had gained particularly deep and impressive knowledge through their years as activists. Their commitment and long experience had turned them into important participants in the overall conversation about what was feasible and best for development in Namibia. The NGO decline in Namibia therefore meant a considerable loss of the NGO staff's expertise and often the institutional knowledge that came along with it when many of the long serving NGO staff left the sector. It is the voice of these committed and often very experienced people that NGOs can add to the overall conversation about development in Africa and that will be lost once the NGO sector is scaled down.

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